

THE DISRUPTIVE AGENCY OF BAPTISM: RECLAIMING THE
CHRISTIAN CALL TO CONVERSION, DIALOGUE, AND
CO-RESPONSIBILITY – SELECTED SESSION

Topic: The Disruptive Agency of Baptism: Reclaiming the Christian Call to Conversion, Dialogue, and Co-Responsibility
 Convener: Ryan McAleer, KU Leuven
 Moderator: Bradford Hinze, Fordham University
 Presenters: Ryan McAleer, KU Leuven
 Maria Cimperman, R.S.C.J., Catholic Theological Union
 Kim Mendoza, KU Leuven

In response to the conference theme of “One Baptism,” this selected session explored the active agency of the baptismal calling through the lenses of conversion, dialogue, and co-responsibility. Reclaiming the fundamental importance of baptism for both personal faith and ecclesial life through such perspectives qualifies this agency as necessarily disruptive. Indeed, the vision of a synodal, appreciative, inclusive, communitarian and ecumenically-oriented church requires a fresh understanding of the baptismal calling that would disrupt, for example, hierarchical structures that monopolize church governance and participation, or paradigms of revelation theology that see faith as a merely passive reception of divine truths. The three papers featured in this panel engaged with insights from sacramental theology, fundamental theology, ecclesiology, and moral/spiritual theology in the examination of the topic.

Ryan McAleer’s paper, “Initiation into the Divine–Human Dialogue,” opened the session by offering a fundamental theological exploration of divine revelation as an intersubjective dialogue that elicits genuine, active agency on the part of the baptized. The journey to faith and illumination of divine mystery, not least the witness thereof, was framed as emerging from the process of various, often difficult, encounters with the other (cf. Jn 9). The disruptive dynamic that marks this process comes to the surface when one acknowledges the mutual, shifting asymmetry that is involved in every authentic, ethical dialogue. While God’s revelation continually surprises and renews us, and notwithstanding one’s prophetic calling to disrupt a world ignorant of the gospel, McAleer suggested, given the dialogical dynamic of revelation, that Godself is interrupted in this divine–human dialogue through history. Baptism is understood, then, as initiating personal dialogue with God as well as providing the faithful with “disruptive agency” in the church and the world. What becomes paramount is one’s responsibility before the transcendence of the other, divine or human: openness to the other, willingness to respond without presumption, allows the Spirit to work and the voice of God to be heard. This largely theoretical paper set the stage for the more praxeological-ecclesiological perspectives of the subsequent papers.

Kim Mendoza’s contribution, “Co-Responsibility and Hierarchical Communion in Church Governance,” problematized the implications of lay co-responsibility in church governance that is constituted within, and made permissible by, the structure of a *hierarchical communion*, exclusive of the ordained. Having outlined the connection between the baptism of the people of God and their co-responsibility, the paper explained how a complication arises in their role, shifting from being passive “objects”

to active “sharers” in governance, which requires disentanglement in more theological and canonical terms. The paper analyzed that the operation of a hierarchical communion challenges the theological coherence of incorporating subjects that lack the juridical requirements (both competency and domain of action) to fully exercise their act of co-responsibility. In her conclusion, some notable theological implications that emerge were described. These include the need to structurally articulate the faithful’s share in the threefold office of Christ, as well as theologically account for the transition of their ecclesial functions, notwithstanding the distinctive role of ordained ministers. Mendoza argued that authentic co-responsibility requires a “polyhedric reconfiguration” of communion that fosters genuine agency, thus enhancing the full and active recognition of the faithful’s baptismal dignity.

A final paper from Maria Cimperman titled, “Baptism and the Call to Ongoing Conversion, with Implications for Communal Discernment and Healing,” explored some issues that need to be amplified and implemented on the part of theologians following the Synod on Synodality. Building upon Jos Moons’ work on “baptismal ethos” and the conviction that baptism and synodality both draw meaning from one another, Cimperman reframed the spiritual-mystical dimension of baptism in terms of virtues: the practices and dispositions needed for a tangible, ongoing, synodal conversion. In reference to the Final Document of the synod, a fully participatory and missionary church can only come about through, not just structural reform, but spiritual renewal. Two necessary virtues brought to the fore by the paper were listening and silence. Listening is essential for a church in search of conversion and renewal—a listening that brings to the center those often left at the margins, listening for what we can learn as a church. Silence animates this authentic listening allowing what the other has said truly sink in; silence grounds us in the Spirit. As a theologian who participated at the recent synod, Cimperman was able to share some insightful narratives from her experience in Rome that peppered her paper— anecdotes of participants’ ‘conversions’ to humility, listening, and transparency—and grounded her call for ongoing conversion.

Following the papers, Bradford Hinze moderated an engaging period of questions and answers. Issues discussed included: the extent to which the current exercise of power by lay judges/administrators can be considered church governance by the laity; the need for decolonial perspectives when it comes to exploring the concept of dialogue, voices that are often not truly heard; the virtue of courage as an important supplement to listening and silence; the need to learn lessons from ecumenical (*ad extra*) dialogue for the church *ad intra*; acknowledgement of one’s cultural context and links to lived practice in our theologies.

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